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Review of Stephen Arons's *Short Route to Chaos**

Stephen Arons, (1997) *Short Route to Chaos : Conscience, Community, and the Re-constitution of American Schooling*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1997, 154 pp plus notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 1-55849-078-7

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Stephen Arons, author of *Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), is one of the most articulate and influential critics of the educational Establishment from the secular Left. In his new book, he takes on the Clinton Administration's efforts to establish national outcome standards--Goals 2000--which he describes as "comprehensive, centralizing, and insensitive to the diversity of goals that students, families, and communities bring to education. Through the use of federal grants and state regulations, it aims to bring every school in every school district in every state into conformity with politically prescribed standards of what should be learned by every child" (page 4). Arons warns that "[o]nce accepted by the public, Goals 2000 will change the balance of power in schoolhouses and courtrooms in a way unlikely ever to be undone. That change in schooling will very likely undermine the freedom of intellect and spirit that has been so essential to the American experience" (page 98).

Over against this threat, Arons sets what he considers the equally menacing efforts of the "Christian Right" to gain control of American schooling in order to undermine freedom. This accusation isn't documented or argued, simply asserted over and over. Is it true that James Dobson (the current bete noir of Progressives) wants to take over the public schools? No, in fact he is calling for vouchers so that parents who wish them can choose religious schools "without financial penalty" as an alternative to public schools. Does Dobson want to reinstitute "school prayer" in the Engel v Vitale sense? Not at all; he recently disavowed that, and wrote that students should be as free to use religious speech as they are to use political or other opinion speech, and no more. The reality is that the "education establishment" which Arons opposes has created the specter of foaming-mouthed ultra conservatives invading the public school, shrine of the American civil religion, to justify its continuing monopoly.

Arons describes a number of recent controversies in which the establishment and the religious Right have struggled over control. Missing from his roster of combatants is the secular Left, which has in fact won far more of the battles to influence the content of the curriculum on issues like sexuality and multiculturalism. It would presumably have been difficult for Arons to admit that the leading cause of resistance by parents to what goes on in public schools has grown out of these victories by the secular Left to shape the message those schools offer. But for Arons, apparently, nothing the Left can do poses a threat to freedom.

Libertarians on the Left, like Arons, are in a difficult position. Most of those who agree with them about the dangers of a government monopoly of education and a strong government role in setting goals for schools are very unwelcome allies: they are conservative Christians whose views they find highly distasteful.

> Among the most frequent targets are secular humanism, the separation of church and state, Darwinian evolution, sexuality and health education. There is little tolerance for any worldview other than that of heterosexual, white, middle-class Christians of Western European origin; little respect for freedom of expression among students and in student publications; and in general, antagonism toward teachers and students who try to explore and evaluate life's most challenging problems of personal, social, or moral conduct. (page 55)

On the other hand, Arons also wants to distance himself from the critics of religious conservatives, as when he points out that People For the American Way's report on censorship efforts "did not even mention that the original selection of textbooks--by statewide, politically created government agencies in twenty-three of fifty states, for example--is as much an act of censorship as the effort to remove those materials once they have been selected" (page 57).

So whom does Arons like and admire? Groups of parents and others who hold contrarian views about how they want their children educated, like the Satmar Hasidim in the Kiryas Joel case in New York State, who can be romanticized because they are exotic and do not relate to anything that can be perceived as threatening potentialities in American life. But not conservative Catholics and Protestants, the people who supported Pat Robertson. Unfortunately for his proposal to "re-constitute American schooling" on the basis of community and the free-exercise of conscience, it is obvious that the great majority of new schools that would spring up under a free and equitable system of educational funding would be based on religious convictions that most Progressives would find very distasteful indeed. That's what freedom's about.

Arons's opposition to centralization does not lead him to support a return to more local control of schools, which he sees as equally unfavorable to freedom: "like Goals 2000, local control can secure neither freedom of intellect and belief nor equal educational opportunity in public schools. It can advance neither the empowerment of parents and communities nor the professionalism of teachers. It can neither reduce unnecessary conflict over matters of conscience nor increase the overall quality of education available to American children" (page 103).

So what does Arons want? He has four concrete and sensible proposals: school choice, school and teacher independence from government regulation of instructional content, a right to publicly-funded schooling, and equity in funding (page 144). These proposals deserve to be spelled out, and the appropriate cautions (consumer protection, for example, and equal access) and nuances inserted. It would have been helpful if Arons--a legal scholar--had confronted the difficult legal issues that would arise under a system of

real educational freedom. For example, should schools be entitled to discriminate on the basis of religion, philosophy, sex, or race in admitting pupils? In hiring staff? In dismissing staff who exercise their "academic freedom" in ways contrary to the distinctive character of the school? If not, how can schools preserve this distinctive character? And if they cannot, will real choice exist for parents who want schools with such a character, and for teachers who want to teach in such schools? What about the pupil who questions received authority, in a school which has been chosen by parents and teachers who want education based upon such authority?

Arons devotes almost no effort to justifying his proposals or to showing how they might be worked out, but turns immediately to calling for a national discussion that would, he believes, lead us to a new level of understanding and an education amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Although conceding that this might "seem an unfavorable time because the Education Empire and the Christian Right continue to be locked in battle over ideology, power, and self-interest in the schools" (page 148), Arons insists that "ordinary citizens" can and must "seize the constitutional moment and depoliticize public education" (page 145). It is exceedingly hard to see how such a discussion could--or should--take place in a democratic society without being "political," nor does Arons offer any suggestions about how it might take place, or under whose sponsorship. A sort of communitarian fuzziness afflicts this erstwhile Libertarian.

Short Route to Chaos is unfortunately not an especially convincing case for the dangers of government control of education through national standards. That such a case could be made, there can be no doubt, but it would have to show how such standards would enforce more conformity than already exists as a result of professional norms and the economics of textbook publishing. In fact, comparative studies have found that schools in France and other countries with national standards enjoy more real autonomy than do schools in the United States, subject as they are to oversight and interference by more than fifteen thousand local school boards. Of course, in France and most other democracies parents can choose publicly-funded non- government schools for their children, including religious schools. This support for freely-chosen community--for which Arons makes an eloquent case--does not appear to conflict with the national education standards which most of these countries have also adopted.

Americans are re-assessing a system of schooling which makes less provision for conscience and community than do those of other countries. Most of the impulse for this reassessment comes from the disenchantment of parents with the quality and with the prevailing secularism--rather than religious neutrality--of public schools. Stephen Arons brings an important contrasting perspective which reaches the same conclusions from a very different starting point. It seems likely, however, that it will continue to be through *Compelling Belief* rather than *Short Route to Chaos* that his voice will be heard.

* Stephen Arons responds to this review in the next article.

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Charles L. Glenn (AB, EdD, Harvard University; PhD, Boston University) is the Chairman, Department of Administration, Training, and Policy Studies and Professor of Education in the Boston University School of Education.

The formulation and implementation of policies affecting the education of urban and racial, ethnic, and religious minority students are the focus of Dr. Glenn's teaching and research. He has published extensively on parent choice, desegregation, use of minority languages in schools, and religion and education. *The Myth of the Common School* (1988) is a historical study of resistance to efforts to use schooling to reshape society in France, the Netherlands, and the United States. *Choice of Schools in Six Nations* and *Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe* survey current policies and controversies. His forthcoming *Minority Languages in Schools* considers how twelve industrialized nations educate the children of immigrants. Dr. Glenn directed the Massachusetts Department of Education's equity and urban-education efforts for more than 20 years and continues to work with educational systems in the United States, Eastern and Western Europe, and the Middle East on policies to balance common standards with school-level autonomy and choice by parents and teachers.

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